

OROMOCTO THIS WEEK

Valcartier explosion victims remembered in book by author who suffered PTSD

By GILLIAN CHRISTIE
This Week

Gerry Fostaty is a man of many talents: actor, author, computer whiz.

He can also add one more to his list of high-calibre capabilities: man in disguise.

Since he was an 18-year-old cadet taking a course at the Army Cadet Summer Training Centre at CFB Valcartier, Que, in July 1974, Fostaty has been ignoring or burying any lasting sign of the trauma he suffered when a grenade killed six fellow cadets.

But, he's journeyed back nearly 40 years to deal with his own post-traumatic stress disorder, commonly referred to as PTSD, and tried to piece together what caused the grenade blast.

He's written the book *As You Were: The Tragedy at Valcartier* and was on hand at Sharla Books in the Oromocto Mall recently to sign copies and discuss the story. Fostaty was on his way from a memorial service in Valcartier and continued on to Atlantic Canada to promote his book here.

Through his account, Fostaty hopes to create more awareness of PTSD.

"Although the book is not primarily about post-traumatic stress disorder, it is kind of a sidebar, because that's really important, especially with so many people now coming back (from military action) and getting that diagnosis," Fostaty said.

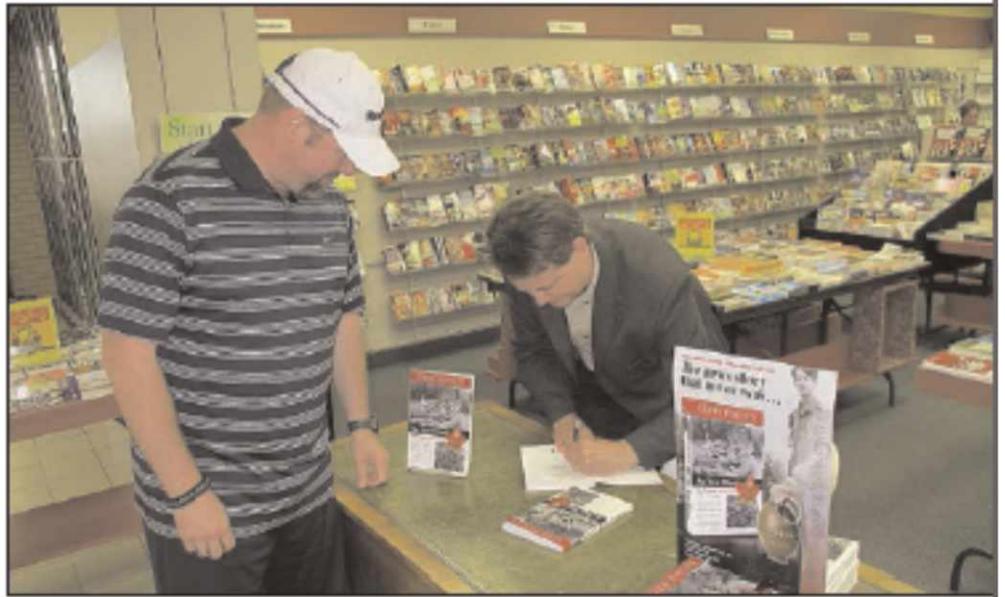
He said many others, emergency personnel, first responders, doctors, firefighters and police — anyone who works in traumatic situations or is exposed to one, can suffer.

"I have been holding onto this for a number of years. I got this email, out of the blue, and it's from my old boss, my company sergeant major, 33 years later, and all it said was 'Were you there?' The hair on the back of my neck just rose up. I thought of him all the time. And I said, 'Yes, I was.'"

Fostaty said he sent that reply and waited for any kind of response. That initial message set in motion what turned out to be the publication of Fostaty's story, a first-hand account of what happened before, during and after that deadly accidental explosion.

"I started trying to explain things to my family because I had never talked to my family about this," he said. "I never spoke to my parents about it. They just assumed that whatever happened, happened near me, not to me — or to us — because my brother was there, too.

"Whenever I tried to explain it to people, including my wife, people got angry, angry at the situation and they'd start asking questions. The answers to the questions, sort of take a side, you sort of end up going down this side path and you



THIS WEEK/GILLIAN CHRISTIE

AUTOGRAPHED COPY: Retired sergeant Chris Belmont gets his copy of *As You Were: The Tragedy at Valcartier* signed by author Gerry Fostaty during the writer's recent visit to Sharla Books in the Oromocto Mall.

don't end up talking about the actual problem."

He said it was difficult to tell the story over and over again so he decided to write it down, put it all together, and organize it chronologically and psychologically, "so people could follow the story and see what happened. And then they can ask questions."

He said while putting his thoughts and feelings on paper seemed to be somewhat helpful, it was also very painful to relive the memories, in detail, all over again.

"It doesn't diminish it; in fact, it gets worse," Fostaty said. "It gets worse because it's not behavioural, it's neurological and you can't fix that neurological problem and that's difficult."

Telling the story and raising awareness about post-traumatic stress disorder in general were the reasons why Fostaty wrote the book.

"The boys who were there are now in their 50s," he said.

"A lot of them are suffering. Many are suffering. Most of them are suffering. Some of them haven't had families, they're physically not capable of having a family; emotionally they can't have a family. There's drug abuse, substance abuse — it's harrowing. They had everything to look forward to."

Fostaty has spoken to groups of RCMP officers and military personnel, military families and veterans groups relaying his message in hopes a better understanding of PTSD can be reached and that it is better recognized.

"(Those cadets) were there for a leadership course to become the next group of leaders," Fostaty said. "For many, the momentum stopped."

He said not a day goes by without thoughts of those boys who died, the others who survived but lost a significant part of their own lives as well and his own experience just being there and looking back on it now. His ability to cope and persevere is a day-to-day process, including the invasion of nightmares and flashbacks.

Some of his fellow former cadets have read the book, some have not, Fostaty said.

"There was a guy yesterday at the memorial who said, 'I'm going to pick it up and read it,'" he said. "He said he would."

Awareness is increasing, Fostaty said, and he is currently working with a group to help get the survivors of the 1974 explosion some professional help, something they never received.

"It's been ignored for 40 years so this is what we're trying to do," he said. "It's with the DND ombudsman now and he's presented it to the minister. We're just waiting for approval to move forward with that investigation.

"It's been 40 years and they're not kids anymore."